

PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS

King Cove road bill passes Senate, 59-38

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A highly contentious bill that would facilitate placing a road in what is now an Alaska wilderness cleared the Senate last week, 59-38, after a lengthy debate.

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Frank Murkowski (R-Alaska) sponsored S. 1092, the King Cove Health and Safety Act, to allow 11 miles of a 30-mile gravel road to enter the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to connect the communities of King Cove and Cold Bay. The Alaska delegation has said the impetus for the bill is to provide safer access for King Cove residents to a hospital in Anchorage.

Companion legislation from House Resources Chairman Don Young (R-Alaska), H.R. 2259 (H.Rpt. 105-398), passed his committee last year but went no further. "With a week left, it's going to be tough" to get a House vote on the measure, but the Senate vote "bolsters" the prospect of moving the bill on the Senate's FY '99 Interior and related agencies spending mark, where it is attached as a rider, said a House Resources Committee GOP source.

Originally, the bill would have placed seven miles of the road in an area of the refuge designated wilderness, but a substitute amendment - which the Senate approved by voice vote - would conduct a land trade reclassifying that parcel as part of the refuge.

The amendment also has King Cove convey 664 acres of its land to the wilderness in exchange for removing 85 acres for the road, which would result in a net gain of 579 acres to the refuge, according to Murkowski's committee.

"This provision does not authorize construction of a road or authorize construction of a road in a wilderness," Murkowski emphasized during the Oct. 1 debate. "It simply adjusts the wilderness boundary. ... Wilderness boundary adjustments are commonplace."

In addition, the amendment allows the Interior secretary to close the road to non-emergency use, said a committee GOP source.

Environmental groups, however, argued that the land is still a highly sensitive wetlands area used by migratory birds. "Moving the wilderness area to put a road through it is simply a ruse to get this road built right over a wetland area," said Michael Carroll, communications director of the Alaska Wilderness League.

The more economical solution would be to provide a doctor and medical facilities in King Cove, rather than building a \$30 million road, said Carroll. "This isn't about a road for safety. This is about rolling back wilderness protection."

S. 1092 is one of two dozen measures - considered "anti-environmental" by conservationists and the administration - affixed to the Senate's version of the Interior and related agencies appropriations bill for FY '99 (S. 2237, S.Rpt. 105-227), which is embroiled in controversy. (See story, p. 5.)

Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) brought up the issue of appropriations riders by complimenting Murkowski for presenting the King Cove measure as a stand-alone bill. "I wish, frankly, that the other riders in the appropriations bill would be brought up in the same manner," Baucus said.

Baucus raised objections to S. 1092, however, by saying inclement weather will make road travel as dangerous as the current method of transporting patients to the hospital. Also, truck use of the road and increased flights out of the area will disrupt migratory birds and other wildlife, he said.

A committee GOP source said the legislation's passage "proved to the American public that a majority of senators agree that human life is indeed more important than 85 acres."

On the other hand, Defenders of Wildlife stated that the vote indicates "the Senate would likely sustain a presidential veto of this environmentally damaging and unnecessary legislation."

- Larisa Epatko